



SPARTAN FIREARMS TRAINING GROUP, LLC

The Great Stopping Power Myth Revisited

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With Research Assistance from ChatGPT 5.0

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If you spend enough time around gun owners, you'll eventually end up in a conversation about which caliber "hits the hardest." It usually turns into the same argument: the .45 guys say their bullet is basically a wrecking ball, the 9mm crowd fires back with charts and gel tests, and someone in the corner mumbles that "shot placement is all that matters" while cleaning a revolver.

Here's the truth, spoken plainly: **handguns aren't magic, and no caliber guarantees anything.** A handgun—any handgun—is a compromise. We carry them because they're portable, not because they're devastating.

But some calibers do perform better than others. And some give you a better fighting chance when a human being is trying to hurt you.

So, let's skip the mythology and talk about what really matters.

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What “Stopping Power” Actually Means (Without the Nonsense)

People throw that term around like it’s a measurable thing, like horsepower. It isn’t. No meter tells you how much “stopping power” a bullet has.

In the real world, a handgun stops an attacker because:

1. **You hit something important**
Not “center mass,” not “good enough,” but a real structure that matters—heart, aorta, brain, spine.
2. **The bullet goes deep enough**
If it doesn’t reach vital organs, it might as well be a pebble.
3. **You can fire more than one accurate shot**
Because no handgun caliber is guaranteed to drop someone instantly unless you hit the brain or spine.

That’s it. Not glamorous, not exciting, but real.

The Stuff That Actually Matters

There are a few factors that truly make a difference:

Penetration

If a bullet can’t punch deep enough into the body to matter, you have a problem. Angles, bone, fat, muscle, clothing—there’s a lot between you and what stops a violent person.

Expansion

When a hollow-point bullet expands, it creates a larger wound channel. Great—*as long as it still penetrates deep enough*. Expansion is a bonus, not the foundation.

Recoil

If the gun jumps out of your hands or the blast makes you flinch, the caliber is too much. People won't admit this because pride gets in the way, but it's the truth. If you can't control it, you can't count on it.

Capacity

More bullets equal more chances to solve the problem. That's all there is to say about that.

Let's Talk Calibers

Here's what each caliber realistically gives you.

.22 LR

People joke about it, but plenty of folks have died from .22s. That doesn't make it a great choice.

What it does well:

Almost no recoil. Easy to shoot. Works for people with weak hands.

Where it struggles:

Shallow penetration, unreliable expansion, and rimfire ammo occasionally fails to ignite.

Real talk:

If a person truly can't handle recoil, a .22 is better than nothing. But nobody should pick it thinking it's going to stop a violent attacker quickly. It probably won't.

.380 ACP

The "pocket gun" round.

Pros: manageable recoil, compact guns, decent performance with the correct ammunition.

Bad: still struggles with penetration from tiny barrels.

Honest verdict:

It's usable. It works better than a .22, but if you can carry 9mm, carry 9mm. The .380 is a compromise for individuals who require compact pistols or have physical limitations.

9mm

This is the standard for a reason.

The upside:

- Enough power
- Enough penetration
- Good expansion
- High capacity
- Manageable recoil

The downside:

Not much. In tiny guns it can feel snappy, but that's a gun issue, not a caliber issue.

Real verdict:

For most normal people, 9mm is the best combination of "stops the threat" and "doesn't make me shoot like garbage." This is why most cops and professionals now carry it.

.40 S&W

Once the FBI darling, now mostly retired.

Pros: hits hard, penetrates well.

Cons: snappy recoil, fewer rounds, slower shooting.

Human verdict:

It works. It just makes you work harder. Modern 9mm ammo has narrowed the gap so much that .40's recoil isn't worth it for most shooters.

.45 ACP

The grand old heavyweight.

Pros: big bullet, decent expansion, surprisingly soft recoil in full-size guns.

Cons: chunky guns, fewer rounds, no magical performance despite the folklore.

Real-world conclusion:

It works just fine if you shoot it well. But it doesn't automatically "stop" people any better than 9mm unless you believe bar stories more than actual data.

.357 Magnum

The king of revolver power.

Pros: fantastic penetration, fantastic expansion, notorious real-world effectiveness.

Cons: brutal recoil and blast, low capacity.

Truth:

If you can shoot it well—which many people can't—it's excellent. But the recoil punishes sloppy technique. Great for rural areas or trail carry. Not ideal for everyone.

10mm Auto

Almost too much of a good thing.

Pros: incredible energy, deep penetration, excellent for big animals.

Cons: stout recoil, expensive ammo, easy to over-penetrate in human targets.

Verdict:

If you're worried about bears, it's excellent. If you're concerned about a carjacker, it's overkill.

5.7 x 28

Very fast and powerful

Pros: Jacketed Hollow Point manufactured for the FN Herstal P90 handgun...traveling at 1,969 feet per second as it reaches 25 feet. When it exits the barrel, it is traveling at 2,216 fps. Ballistics vary depending on the manufacturer. The round can penetrate body armor (select loadings are known for penetrating up to Level IIIa). 5.7mm has low recoil and a flatter trajectory, making it easier to hit targets at a greater distance.

Cons: The guns cost more. They aren't the easiest pistols to conceal. The ammunition costs more and isn't nearly as widely available. Do those costs totally justify the benefits? Well, that's up to you.

(One of our customers brought his P90 with 5.7x28 ammo to the range for his wife to use to renew her carry permit. It is an impressive handgun and she handled it effectively.)

What Decades of Shootings Teach Us

When you step away from Internet arguments and look at real-world outcomes, here are the lessons:

1. A hit with a smaller caliber is better than a miss with a big one.

People hate hearing this, but it's true.

2. Modern 9mm, .40, and .45 all perform more similarly than people expect.

Bullet design has come a long way. The old ".45 stops them, 9mm just makes them mad" line hasn't been true for decades.

3. Recoil matters more than caliber snobs admit.

Stress turns good shooters into average shooters. Average shooters become shaky shooters. If recoil is already a struggle on the range, expect it to get worse under pressure.

So, What Should You Carry?

Here's the most honest answer anyone will give you:

CARRY TOP-QUALITY DEFENSIVE AMMUNITION! Carry the most powerful caliber you can shoot well—fast, accurately, and repeatedly.

For most people, that's **9mm**.

For others:

- .45 works great if the gun fits you
- .380 works for those who need softer recoil
- .357 works for the dedicated revolver crowd
- .22 works only when bigger calibers are off the table
- 10mm works in the woods
- 5.7 x 28 for those who can afford the handgun and ammo, and the training to use it.

Final Word: Stopping Power Is Mostly You

Caliber matters, but not nearly as much as people think. A handgun is only as practical as the person holding it.

- Your grip
- Your training
- Your accuracy
- Your ability to stay calm
- Your willingness to put in reps

That's the absolute stopping power.

A 9mm in steady hands is more comforting than a .45 in hands that flinch. A .380 that you actually carry is better than a .357 you leave at home.

And no caliber will make up for the absence of training.

Stopping power isn't a number on a box. **Stopping power is you showing up prepared.**

About the Author

Francis (Frank) Duffy is a veteran of the 6th and 5th U.S. Army Special Forces Groups (the Green Berets), a graduate of the Army Ranger School, and a Green Beret combat diver. He is also a certified executive protection specialist.

He is a certified instructor for the NRA (rifle and handgun instructor), the Maryland State Police, and the United States Concealed Carry Association (USCCA). He is also a certified concealed carry instructor for the District of Columbia.

He is also a member of the Board of Directors for Maryland Shall Issue, an all-volunteer, non-partisan organization dedicated to preserving and advancing gun owners' rights in Maryland. He is the co-founder and Vice President of Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC. He can be reached at 443-472-0216 or via email at frank@spartanftg.com.

Individuals interested in scheduling a private, one-on-one firearms training session should contact Frank.

About the Spartan Firearms Training Group

The Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC (www.spartanftg.com) is a Special Forces Veteran-Owned business formed in 2015 by Paul and Francis Duffy. At the end of March 2025, we entered into our 11th year of business, and we have trained thousands of Maryland residents in a variety of ways:

- Concealed carry training
- Handgun Qualification License (HQL) training
- Emergency Casualty Care training
- Long-distance precision shooting training
- Home Defense training

- Private, 1-on-1 firearms training
- Private group training

Our training calendar can be found at the [SFTG Calendar](#).

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WHEN FACING A LIFE-THREATENING EVENT, YOU WILL FALL TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR TRAINING, NOT RISE TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR EXPECTATIONS. TRAIN THE WAY YOU FIGHT!

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